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AN ITALIAN HISTORY OF THE "DECLINE AND FALL OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE" *

This is a book of commanding importance. It deals with one of the great epochs of the world's history — the dissolution of the Roman Republic. Giants stalk across the scene: Marius, Sulla, Lucullus, Pompey, Cæsar — who not merely had a giant's strength, but used it as a giant. It was a time of infinite confusion, when Rome, corrupted by the conquest of the East, had lost her discipline, but not her force, and when the strength which had once been employed in building up the State spent itself in riot. It was a time when the social bonds were loosened; when the law had lost its power and custom its reverence; when men craved wealth and pleasure and authority with a wolfish hunger and struggled for the mastery like lions or jackals. It was an age of infinite intrigue, when party affiliations changed like the figures of the kaleidoscope, the sworn enemies of yesterday linking themselves together to-day for some purpose of self-aggrandizement or revenge.

To present a vivid picture of all these striking characters which shall yet be just, to follow all these complicated threads without entanglement, requires the highest gifts of the historian; and these Signor Ferrero has manifested in such measure that it seems as if his work must be the final word on the subject, unless the spade of the excavator shall throw new light upon the scene.

The book is important in showing even more clearly than Mommsen the great influence that economic causes had upon the course of events. Then, as now, the party in power was held responsible for hard times. But when hard times came they did not waste their breath discussing a reform of the currency — they sent out a Lucullus or a Pompey, who returned with the plunder of some unhappy kingdom and restored prosperity by

*THE GREATNESS AND DECLINE OF ROME. By Guglielmo Ferrero. Translated from the Italian by Alfred A. Zimmern. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons.

the sack of cities. Then, as now, if any reform was suggested, there arose the cry that it would hurt business, and it was dropped. Then, as now, the want of money was deemed the worst of evils, and the hunger for it was the mainspring of human action.

And Signor Ferrero shows as clearly as Mommsen that the Republic had survived its usefulness, that it had become a den of robbers beneath whose extortions the world writhed in the agony of dissolution. It was deemed the right of the Senators and Knights to batten upon the spoils of the world. First came the conqueror, who sacked the cities, robbed the temples, and carried off a large part of the inhabitants into slavery. Then came the proconsul, with an enormous suite, all of whom must be enriched; and to meet their demands the Roman capitalist lent his money at the rate of forty-eight per cent, and so ate out the substance of the land. Even the virtuous Brutus lent money at this rate, and fell out with Cicero because he would not make slaves of the unhappy debtors.

But while Signor Ferrero agrees with Mommsen on most points, he differs from him widely on one of the most important—the character of Cæsar. In his devotion to German imperialism and the German Kaiser, Mommsen seeks to prove that the Kaiser's mighty prototype was not only the greatest, but the best of men. He has to admit that Cæsar used as his implements creatures the most debauched—Clodius, Dolabella, Curio, Anthony and the like; that he was associated with the worst band of rascalions that ever looted the world. But in his eyes Cæsar is always the blameless patriot, of broad and enlightened views, a statesman who, had he been spared a few years longer, would have reformed all abuses. The Commentaries, which were really political pamphlets written and published for self-justification, Mommsen accepts as gospel truth, and believes that Cæsar, who displayed so little scruple in the other means that he employed, was as incapable of a lie as the youthful Washington. He not only heaps abuse on everyone who opposed Cæsar, but even on those who, like Cicero, merely held aloof, seeking to conciliate the warring elements and to save the Republic from the strife of faction.

Signor Ferrero is not hostile to Cæsar. His sympathies are usually with him; and while he shows that Cæsar in his pursuit of power was trammelled by no scruples, he shows also that Cæsar's aims were moderate and in the main just, and that only the stupidity, violence and injustice of his adversaries drove him on to their destruction and to supreme power. But he is not blind to Cæsar's faults. He concedes that he was probably the greatest man that ever lived, but he sees that after all he was a man, and as such he often fell into error. Our author compares the Commentaries with the other authorities, and tries dispassionately to reach the truth. And he is forced to admit that Cæsar showed no great capacity for constructive statesmanship. When he had destroyed the old order, when the whole world was in ruins at his feet, he did not stop to gather up the fragments and to rebuild the shattered structure along fairer and juster lines. Like Alexander, like Napoleon, he was seized by the madness of the conqueror. Parthia lured him to his ruin as Russia lured the Corsican. Instead of doing the work of reconstruction that was so absolutely essential, he dreamed, despite of his advanced age and shattered health, of following the footsteps of Alexander across the burning sands of Asia; and it was the need of money rather than the thirst for glory that drove him on. The whole empire had been reduced to beggary by proconsular lootings and the civil war, and Cæsar hoped, like Lucullus and Pompey, to fill the public coffers and restore prosperity by the plunder of the East. It was the dread of this mad adventure, where Crassus had lost his army and his life, as much as the Dictator's arrogance of demeanor, that led to his assassination. Truly, as Signor Ferrero says, he was not a great statesman, but a great destroyer, whose mission it was to clear the ground that his successor might build.

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